DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 651 CE 056 850

AUTHOR Kleiber, Pamela B.; Holt, Margaret E.
TITLE Focus Groups: A Tool in Planning and Evaluation in Continuing Education.
PUB DATE 4 Nov 90
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (Salt Lake City, UT, November 4, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; *College Programs; *Continuing Education; *Continuing Education Centers; Educational Research; Higher Education; Postsecondary Education; Program Attitudes; Program Evaluation; *Research Methodology; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Focus Groups Approach; *Georgia Center for Continuing Education

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to analyze and describe faculty usage of the Georgia Center for Continuing Education at the University of Georgia and to determine the usefulness of using focus groups in such research. Focus group methods and survey questionnaires were used during a series of five dinner discussion sessions with a total of 31 participants representing 13 academic units at the university. Among the more significant findings was that the participants have generally positive feelings about their experience at the Georgia Center. They find the staff professional, the facilities accommodating, and the service provided valuable. Although the ability of the Georgia Center to serve very diverse continuing education needs was perceived as a valuable dimension, rising costs and increasing bureaucratic complexity were perceived as barriers to continued service to a wide range of conference offerings. Participants suggested the opportunity for ongoing, formalized interchange as a means of strengthening the relationship between the faculty and the Georgia Center for Continuing Education. The study concluded that focus groups are an excellent tool for organizations to use to listen to their clients. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED329651

FOCUS GROUPS: A TOOL IN PLANNING AND EVALUATION IN CONTINUING EDUCATION

Presentation made at
American Association of Adult and Continuing Education
ference
Adult Education: On Trial
Salt Lake City, Utah

by Pamela B. Kleiber, M.Ed.
Doctoral Student
Adult Education Department
University of Georgia

Dr. Margaret E. Holt
Associate Professor
Adult Education Department
University of Georgia

November 4, 1990

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

P K Kleiber
M Holt

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CE 056 650

BACKGROUND
The Merging of Three Agendas

The purpose of this presentation is to explain how focus groups of faculty at the University of Georgia were brought together to provide input and share perspectives on their experiences with the Georgia Center for Continuing Education. A doctoral student in the Adult Education Department designed the study under the direction of a faculty member. She implemented the study and constructed a report of her findings. This presentation is intended to describe the process.

The Georgia Center had an agenda when they agreed to do the study. The faculty members and the doctoral student also had agendas. The Director of the Georgia Center was responsive to his marketing director in agreeing to the study. The director wished to conduct focus groups with faculty users because he saw the need to listen to his clients, and faculty were viewed as extremely important clients. He noted that in 1957, the Georgia Center for Continuing Education was "the only game in town" as far as conference facilities in the immediate area. Times had changed. Now many others were in the business of continuing education. It was becoming increasingly more competitive. "In a decade of shifting demographics and stiff competition from the private sector, other universities, and the state, 'market misjudgment' must be avoided at all costs. With approaching completion of all new construction and renovation projects, internally the push is to win significant new business for our residential conference center. We must be

increasingly sensitive to what clients tell us about educational format, program content, facilities, food service and other related activities." (McGinty, 1990, p.3). The focus groups were an effective way to say to the faculty, "We are listening and we do care." The director noted that everyone may not end up on your side, but if you are persistent in applying the findings of the study, you can use the information to change the organizational culture.

The associate director said the focus groups were important because they could help answer questions about who the Center was serving, and how they should be served. He already had conducted internally a program audit -- a content analysis of offerings. The focus groups were much more qualitative and provided more in-depth, rich information from the face-to-face interviews with faculty. The focus groups, according to the associate director, related to an important philosophical polemic concerning usage: should the Center be in the business of facility usage or the business of planning and developing quality educational programs. The focus groups provided information about what the faculty were thinking and helped make sense of some of what he had gleaned from the internal program audit. Faculty participants who requested a report of the findings were advised they would receive such.

The Adult Education faculty advisor's agenda was to help the student find a setting in which she could experience the actual

planning, implementation, analysis and reporting of focus group research and begin to test some of the assumptions she had formed from both her readings and her reflections. She was guided as far as possible in the literature search, introduced to individuals at the Public Agenda Foundation in New York who utilize focus groups to frame public policy issues, after which she was ready for a chance to experiment first-hand with this small-group interview technique and to apply the guidelines she had uncovered in a real settings.

The Georgia Center had an agenda. The faculty advisor had an agenda. The graduate student had an agenda. The project gave everyone a chance to merge all three agendas in useful ways. One of the major reasons a study such as this was possible was because of the splendid relationship between the Department of Adult Education and the Center for Continuing Education, a vibrant laboratory of adult learning. The full report totaled sixty-one pages. The following document is the Executive Summary of the student's report which includes an abstract, objective, methodology, and reporting procedures. The Table of Contents is included in order to provide questions and the organization of the report.

Reference

McGinty, D. (ed.) July 1990. "Lookouts", The Newsletter of the Environmental Scanning Project, Georgia Center for Continuing Education, The University of Georgia, Athens, 5 (2), p.3.

The Georgia Center for Continuing Education

Faculty-Dinner Discussions

Focus Groups and Survey Report

May 31, 1990

Submitted by:

Pamela B. Kleiber

Abstract

This report is a descriptive analysis of The University of Georgia faculty usage of the Georgia Center for Continuing Education. Qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used. The focus group methodology and survey questionnaires were implemented during a series of five dinner discussion sessions with a total of thirty-one participants representing thirteen academic units at The University of Georgia.

Among the more significant findings was that the participants have generally positive feelings about their experience at the Georgia Center, finding the staff professional, the facilities accommodating and the service provided valuable. While the ability of the Georgia Center to serve very diverse continuing education needs was perceived as a valuable dimension, rising costs and increasing bureaucratic complexity were perceived as barriers to continued service to a wide-range of conference offerings.

The opportunity for on-going, formalized interchange was among the suggestions offered by participants as a means of strengthening the relationship between the faculty and the Georgia Center for Continuing Education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Objective 8

Methodology..... 9

Limitations and Uses.....12

Reporting.....14

Results.....15

I. Questions and Responses

Question #1 8

What purposes do you see a continuing education center serving on a university campus?

Question #2.....12

Please briefly describe your relationship with the Georgia Center for Continuing Education.

Question #3.....17

Take a moment to reflect back on your first experience with the Georgia Center and then consider the Center today. Has the Center changed? How has the Center changed?

Question #4.....22

What do you consider to be the most valuable contribution the Center makes?

Question #5.....25

If you could make one change in the Center and its relationship with the campus, what would it be?

Question #6.....28

What question should I have asked you this evening?

Question #7*.....29

Does the Georgia Center meet the continuing education needs of the Black campus community?

II. Issues and Suggestions...34

Rising Costs.....34

Competition.....36

Faculty.....37

Finances.....41

Conference Planning.....44

Instruction.....48

Facilities 48

Audio Visual Services....49

Marketing.....51

Athens.....52

About Focus Groups.....53

III. Questionnaires

Publications 54

Services.....55

Summary and Recommendations....56

Appendices

A. Questionnare - Progress and Services

B. Questionnaire - Publications

C. Confirmation letter

D. Thank you letter

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study was to describe faculty usage of the Georgia Center for Continuing Education and to gain insight into how to enhance usage. The project was undertaken by the Marketing Department of the Georgia Center. The information may be used in future planning in order to maximize the use of the Center by faculty.

METHODOLOGY

In February and March, 1990, a series of five focus groups were conducted with an average of six participants in each group. Thirty-one faculty were recruited from thirteen academic units across The University of Georgia Campus. An attempt was made to group faculty from different academic areas in each meeting. With few exceptions, this occured.

The Georgia Center's Conference Planning Department provided lists of one hundred and fourteen faculty who had been involved in conference planning and short courses at the Georgia Center. A combination of factors such as recruiting a cross-section of faculty for each group, busy signals and unanswered telephones significantly contributed to a reduction in numbers actually contacted. Forty-nine telephone calls to faculty resulted in extending an invitation to participate in a dinner-discussion meeting focused on faculty usage of the Georgia Center. Eighteen people were unable to participate due to schedule problems. (While an unsuccessful attempt was made to schedule a noon meeting, future focus groups should allow for daytime scheduling. At least one person gave the reason of an evening meeting for not participating.)

A letter of confirmation went out to all the faculty who agreed to participate. (See Appendix for letter of confirmation.) A few

people had to reschedule. The rescheduling was the factor that created more than one person from the same area in a few instances. Only one person who originally agreed to participate was unable to reschedule.

The groups were held in the Georgia Center Banquet Room with dinner preceding the taped group interviews. The dinner allowed the groups who for the most part may have known of one another, but who had not interacted before, to establish a rapport. This was effective in optimizing the group interaction. The group responded to six predetermined questions (the group of Black Faculty received a seventh question) and subsequent probing questions from the moderator. In addition, this established an appropriate group dynamic important to the focus group process which prevented the situation from becoming a series of individual interviews conducted in a group setting.

Each dinner period lasted for approximately one hour with one and one-half hours for interviewing. Two brief questionnaires were completed prior to the group interview. One surveyed familiarity with the major publications of the Center. The other surveyed usage of programs and services of the Center. All sessions were audio-taped. This is adequate documentation of the dialogue for reporting purposes. Video taping was not determined necessary for the moderator-reporter. (This would only be advisable if the client felt a need for a visual record. Also, it would be

impossible to maintain the anonymity of the respondents in such a case. The perception of the moderator-reporter is that anonynmity was useful in obtaining candid responses.)

All participants received a thank you letter from the Georgia Center's Director and Marketing Head as well as complimentary time in the Personal Adult Learning Lab. (See Appendix for letter of thanks.)

LIMITATIONS AND USES

Focus groups are an excellent tool for organizations to use to "listen" to their clients. The focus group method is used extensively in business and marketing to learn more about customers. The method is increasingly being used in education with selected target populations. The data are qualitative in nature. Care has to be used to not generalize beyond the context these participants represent.

The original intention of this project was to compare and contrast new users with repeat users. However, the lists did not prove reliable in separating these groups. Users identified their relationships with the Center as users and repeat users in the questioning. Apparently insignificant differences existed.

The first three groups resulted in a disproportionate number of non-minority males. Consequently, for the last two groups an attempt was made to recruit more females and minority faculty. Lists of Black faculty were available through the Marketing department but no lists were obtained identifying non-Black minority faculty. Ten females including two Black females and six Black males participated. *The group of all Black faculty members were asked one additional question: Do you feel that the Georgia Center is meeting the needs of the Black campus community at The University of Georgia?

Only one participant had been a presenter but not a planner at the Georgia Center. Many of the others also had presenting experience at the Center.

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please indicate the programs and services of the Georgia Center for Continuing Education that you use by placing a check on the line across from the listing. Thank you.

____ CONFERENCE PLANNING

____ MEETINGS

____ SHORT COURSES

____ PERSONAL ADULT LEARNING LAB

____ EVENING CLASSES

____ INTERNATIONAL, OFF-CAMPUS AND IN-SERVICE EDUCATION

____ INDEPENDENT STUDY

____ DINING

____ LODGING

____ WUGA PUBLIC RADIO

____ LIBRARY

____ STUDENT RECRUITMENT

____ FACULTY RECRUITMENT

____ PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT

____ PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE

____ OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)

Please return to the list and mark "M" by those programs and services you are most interested in using and an "L" by those that you are least interested in using. Thank you.

APPENDIX B

PUBLICATIONS

1. Please indicate those publications with which you are familiar.

	YES	NO
a. Georgia Center Quarterly	___	___
b. Preview	___	___
c. WUGA Program Guide	___	___
d. Daily Bulletin	___	___

2. Were you aware that these publications are published by the Georgia Center? Please specify.

3. Comments:

APPENDIX C

March 14, 1990

FACULTY
Department
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the dinner discussion group on Thursday, March 15, 1990 at 5:30 p.m. at The Georgia Center For Continuing Education. As Ms. Kleiber mentioned in your telephone conversation, the discussion will focus on faculty use of The Georgia Center For Continuing Education. We appreciate your willingness to engage in what we hope will be a lively and productive discussion. You will join six other University of Georgia faculty and administrators who will participate in the discussion facilitated by Ms. Kleiber. Ms. Kleiber has had experience in conducting such groups and will provide The Georgia Center staff with a report at the conclusion of three dinner discussion groups. The groups are intentionally small in order to ensure everyone's input. Dinner will be served at 5:30 p.m. in the Banquet Room Area. Signs will indicate the room number. Discussion will follow the meeting and will conclude no later than 8:00 p.m.

In order to acknowledge, in some way, your time commitment on behalf of The Georgia Center, we will extend a selection of complimentary services of The Georgia Center to you. A personal letter to you acknowledging these offerings will be available after the dinner meeting.

Again, thank you for your support. If you have any questions, please call me at 542-1226 or Ms. Kleiber at 542-6760.

Sincerely,

Linda Ford-Howell
Head, Marketing

Pam Kleiber
Group Facilitator

APPENDIX D

March 15, 1990

Dear Colleague:

On behalf of the Georgia Center for Continuing Education, thank you for participating in tonight's dinner discussion meeting. We certainly value our relationship with the campus community and appreciate your insights and opinions on how we can further enhance faculty usage of the Georgia Center.

We wish to take this opportunity to invite you to take advantage of the Georgia Center's Personal Adult Learning Lab. Our staff will reserve two complimentary hours for your use in the lab. Enclosed you will find a brochure describing PALS' many unique services and your coupon (note expiration date). Please call 542-1756 to make your reservations.

Again, thank you for sharing your perspectives with us.

Sincerely,

Edward G. Simpson, Jr.
Director